

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

Safe and Secure 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

Introduction

The apostle Paul has been talking about the coming culmination of evil and rebellion against God under the poison leadership of the man of lawless empowered by Satan himself. Human kingdoms rise and fall, no matter how powerful or wicked, and the kingdom of this blasphemous world ruler will be no different. Jesus the Messiah will destroy him and his kingdom.

But that is not how Jesus the Savior and Judge will treat His own who have put their faith in Him to rescue them from sin, Satan, and the wrath of God. Paul wants his readers to know that if they are trusting in Jesus they are safe and secure now and forever.

13 But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. **14** To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. **15** So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions

that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

¹⁶ Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

1. Grateful for God's Demonstrated Love (13-14)
2. Loyal to the Apostles' Instruction (15)
3. Reliant on God's Continuing Grace (16-17)

1. Grateful for God's Demonstrated Love (13-14)

¹³ But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

It is right and appropriate to the point of obligation for Paul and his collaborators to give God thanks for what has been happening in the lives of those in Thessalonica who were trusting in Jesus. Thanking God for what He's doing in the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ is an important habit for us, too.

Brothers—born again members of the family of God, His life at work in them, transforming them from the inside out and binding them in love not only to God the Father, Son, and

Spirit but also to brothers and sisters in Christ who like themselves were trusting in Jesus.

Beloved by the Lord—in contrast to those destroyed by the Lord Jesus who refused to believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness, He loves them with a love that stretches from eternity past to eternity future. Paul goes on to furnish the proof of that divine love.

Because God chose you as the firstfruits (or from the beginning—some manuscripts have a one letter difference) to be saved—rescued from the wrath just described against the lawless ones of the age

How does God accomplish this? What means does He use?

His choice in the beginning breaks into our personal histories in this way:
through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth

The Spirit of God regenerates us and sets us apart to God as His own children; He convicts us of our sin and of our need for the Savior; He convinces us that the gospel message is actually true.

Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God, which by the way, the Holy Spirit inspired so that holy men of old wrote

down the actual words of God—the Word of God opens our ears to the truth and by the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit we are convinced we can rely on it.

Anyone who ends up trusting in Jesus does so as a result of God’s work in him or her. How do you know who the chosen ones of God are? They are the ones the Spirit convinces and regenerates with life from God. They are the same ones who believe the truth of the gospel.

The second action of God’s love is His call.
2 Thessalonians 2:14

To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God uses the good news to call sinners to repentance and faith. He calls us not just to turn to Christ. His call includes all the transformation He will work in us so that we will one day obtain the glory—the shining splendor—of our Lord Jesus Christ. His sinless character. His immortal life. His eternal inheritance. We become citizens of His kingdom, children in His family. As we grow, we think and behave more and more like Jesus. We will share in His resurrection. Even death cannot hold us. We will gain immortality. We will share in His blameless holiness. In that day we will be completely

sinless and incapable of sinning. Inhabitants of the heavenly city come to a new earth where righteousness has taken up residence. No more sin, sickness, death, or sorrow. Finally free from all the curse of sin forever.

When God calls you to put faith in Jesus, this is the destiny to which He is calling you. If you balk at the call of the gospel because you think you will have to give up too much control of your life, you don't understand what's actually going on. You aren't in control. You're a slave to sin and Satan. You are doomed to eternal wrath. The only hope is for you to trust God and His goodness enough that you take hold of His offer of rescue. God gives us an entirely new destiny so good and so grand that it's hard to get our minds fully around it.

Paul's words here remind us of what he said to the believers in Rome:

Romans 8:28-30

28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. **30** And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

The greatest gift you could ever possess is that God loves you with a love that will never let you go. He has loved you from before the world began, and He will love you through all the eons of eternity future.

Show yourself to be among His chosen ones by yielding to the Holy Spirit's conviction in your heart, and by relying on the truth of the good news that has been preached to you. That is the only way to be safe and secure forever.

Applications

- What brothers and sisters in Christ do you thank God for who show evidence that He has chosen and called them to eternal glory?
- What evidence do you see in your life of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying influence?
- If you are relying on the truth of the gospel, how can the assurance that God loves you with an everlasting love give you courage and confidence that you are safe and secure?

2. Loyal to the Apostles' Instruction (15)

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

God's love as manifest by His choice and all of us is not a call to smug passivity. As the letter

to the Hebrews taught us, we must persevere in our faith. How does that happen in our lives? Through holding fast to what has been revealed through the apostles He sent to bear witness to the good news of Jesus.

Stand firm and hold to the traditions—what has been passed on to us
Not just any traditions—people and even churches pass on ideas and practices that are imperfect, false, and even harmful

Peter uses this term in 1 Peter 1:18
You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers.

These traditions in verse 15 are those “that you were taught by us”—the apostles, appointed by the Lord Jesus, to proclaim the true gospel

either by our spoken word or by our letter

Remember that as Paul is writing this letter the New Testament Scriptures were not yet complete. 2 Thessalonians will be part of that collection. Paul repeatedly refers to what he and the other missionaries orally taught the Thessalonians in person. In fact, the apostles were preaching the gospel some twenty years before even the first book of the NT was written down.

But because the apostles would eventually die out, they committed their oral teaching to writing. That apostolic teaching is preserved for us in the New Testament books.

Some religious traditions rip this verse out of context in order to teach that there are other apostolic traditions that were never written down in the NT that also have apostolic authority. It's a convenient claim for when church leaders want to add something new. And what so often happens is that what they add twists or contradicts the written Word of God.

The key is this—these are traditions taught by the first-century apostles of Jesus. No one else dare add or subtract from their authorized teaching. They taught it orally, then they wrote it down so that there would be no question as to what they actually taught. Remember that the reason the believers in Thessalonica had become fretful about the day of the Lord was that someone had claimed apostolic authority that it had already come. Paul wrote this very letter to expose that lie and calm their hearts. Beware what claims to be teaching from God. What do the Scriptures written by the prophets and apostles actually say? Test everything by that.

We live in an age of “chronological snobbery,” as C. S. Lewis put it. We think that recent means better, smarter, more reliable. That’s a debatable claim at best. And when it comes to what would challenge the words of Scripture, its an utterly false claim. Be very careful. *It may seem simplistic to say I believe because “the Bible tells me so,” but if you transfer your trust to something else, you are building on shifting sand.* It won’t matter how smart you are, how deft you are with philosophy, how in tune you are with the wisdom of the times, or even how much influence and responsibility you have had in the church, you will wander off into darkness.

If you are to stand firm, you must hold fast to the apostolic testimony preserved in the written Word of God. If you let go of what the apostles delivered over to us, you will not stand firm. You cannot. Don’t let yourself become complacent or arrogant. It is your connection to the apostolic gospel testimony that keeps you safe and secure. Those that deviate from it reveal that they were never true followers of Jesus however much they may have looked for a time like they were.

Applications

- What ideas and pressures tend to intimidate you or draw you away from holding tightly to the apostolic teaching recorded in the Scriptures?

- What daily and weekly patterns have you established to strengthen your grip on what the Scriptures teach and thus to protect you from all that would lead you astray?
- What brothers and sisters in Christ are close enough to you to encourage you to stand firm and hold fast?

3. Reliant on God's Continuing Grace (16-17)

¹⁶ Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

Paul closes the chapter with a prayer of benediction.

The ground of his prayer and confidence is found in God Himself. He has already talked about the work of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here he points our attention to our personal connection with God again: God the Son—the Lord Jesus Christ himself—along with God our Father who Loved us

Gave us eternal comfort and good hope
Comforts and consolations come and go, but this the comfort God has already given us as our present possession through the gospel is

constant and forever. It will never be removed.

Good hope—Christian hope is certainty regarding the future; and there’s no other way to characterize it but good, that is, beneficial.

John Newton says it famously in his hymn *Amazing Grace*:

*The Lord has promised good to me;
His Word my hope secures.
He will my shield and comfort be
As long as life endures.*

Through grace—an unearned gift from the triune God, given not according to human merit but because of the redemptive work of Christ for us.

On this basis, then, Paul prays for God the Father and God the Son to
Comfort your hearts—to us, we think mainly of emotions when we refer to the heart; but both OT and NT refer to the heart as the seat of intellect and will as well. The core of who you are.

Proverbs 4:23

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

So Paul is talking about comfort at the deepest level of who we are and what drives our decision making and action.

And establish them (your hearts) in every good work and word

There is practical lifestyle impact God creates through bringing gospel comfort to the core of our being. He makes us stable. And from that stability of knowing we are loved and that our future is secure come deeds and words that are good.

Applications

- Armed with knowing you are loved by God, how can the eternal comfort and good hope God gives help you endure the difficulties and seize the opportunities in your life?
- What brothers and sisters in Christ can you pray for this way—that God will comfort and establish them so that good deeds and words flow from their lives?

Conclusion

If you have not yet put your full faith in the truth of the gospel God has revealed, what is holding you back? If His gospel rings true to you, will you not put the full weight of your trust in God to make good on His promises? If He is calling you today, it is good evidence

that He has already chosen you. Listen to the Spirit's convicting and convincing work in your heart and trust Jesus now, today. Don't wait. Don't fight against Him. Bow your will. Yield. Trust. Eternal comfort and good hope are His gracious gifts to you. For Jesus the Messiah, Son of God, has died on the cross to pay for your sin debt. He has risen from the dead to show you His power even over death. And even now He intercedes for those who are trusting Him till they enter their eternal inheritance He has purchased for them.

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Closing Song: God of Grace

Summary of Applications

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- What evidence do you see in your life of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying influence?
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- What ideas and pressures tend to intimidate you or draw you away from holding tightly to the apostolic teaching recorded in the Scriptures?
- What daily and weekly patterns have you established to strengthen your grip on what the Scriptures teach and thus to protect you from all that would lead you astray?
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- Armed with knowing you are loved by God, how can the eternal comfort and good hope God gives help you endure the difficulties and seize the opportunities in your life?
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Additional Discussion Questions

- What impact does thanking God for what He's doing in the lives of believers you know have on your own thinking and attitudes?
- What could be some reasons that Paul connects experiencing comfort from God with being firmly established in the faith?

- What is the connection between divine comfort and stabilizing with good works and good words?